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SOME THEORIES OF BUDDHIST DATES

In a work of mine recently published with twenty-four articles¹ I have included several with arguments about certain important dates of Buddhism. In particular, there is an article, "Date and Era of the Buddha"; another on Nāgārjuna, still two others on Aśaṅga and his brother Vasubandhu – each of these last three having treatment of dates besides doctrinal matters. Here, I intend to go only into the matter of dates and/or associated eras regarding the persons noted.

A. Date and era of the Buddha. Recently there have been arguments among scholars as to the dates of Gautama Buddha, some espousing what is called the "long chronology" which puts his passing called Nirvāṇa around 483 B.C. (after a life of 80 years), and others who support a "short chronology" which has put his Nirvāṇa at around 400 B.C. (some such exponents putting it even several decades later). The present writer is on the side of the "long chronology"; and while I tell why, will utilize the main points in my published essay. Indeed, I agree with the Indian historian Raychaudhuri, who accepts the assailed "dotted record of Canton" and defends the 486 B.C. solution².

¹ A. WAYMAN, "Date and Era of the Buddha", in *Untying the Knots in Buddhism; Selected Essays*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996.

² H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, in *Ancient India*, Part I of *An Advanced History of India*, London, 1960, p. 58.

It is well known that the Ceylonese historical text *Mahāvamsā* puts at 218 the number of years from the Nirvāṇa to Aśoka's coronation, which took place in 268 B.C.³ And it can be immediately noticed that this leads to Raychaudhuri's acceptance. Then it can be asked, why do other scholars espouse the so-called "short chronology"? This undoubtedly happened when persons who read Asian accounts, found in northern Buddhist texts remarks to the effect that a Dharma-Aśoka had sponsored a Buddhist council about 100 years after the Nirvāṇa. Supporters of the "short chronology" were evidently fooled by such scriptural passages. But Indian history records that about a century after the Buddha's Nirvāṇa a ruler of Magadha called Kālāsoka or Kākavarṇa transferred his residence from Girivraja (implicating the old capital Rājagṛha) to Pāṭaliputra⁴, from which the present city of Patna descends.

Evidently, the name Kālāsoka was confused with the Aśoka of the Maurya dynasty in those northern Buddhist texts. But Indian historians were not fooled because it is impossible to take the king contemporaries of Gautama Buddha and put them so close to the Maurya King Aśoka. At the time of the Buddha, who as the son of the King Śuddhodana easily consorted with kings, there was the King Bimbisāra, who established the town of Rājagṛha, which became the capital of Magadha for a while. Raychaudhuri takes Bimbisāra's access to fall about 545 B.C.⁵ During most of the Buddha's long years of preaching, Bimbisāra was the king of Magadha. In Bimbisāra's old age, he was murdered by his son Ajātaśatru, who eventually defeated all his new enemies of neighboring states. Both Mahāvira of the Jaina order, and the Buddha are said to have died early in Ajātaśatru's reign⁶. Besides Bimbisāra, Buddhist traditions speak of the contemporary king of

³ WILLIAM GEIGER, *The Mahāvamsā*, Colombo, 1950, p. xxiii, ff.

⁴ H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, *Ancient India*, p. 61. Besides, H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, in *Age of the Nandas and Mauryas*, ed. by K. A. NILAKANTA SASTRI, Delhi, 1967, p. 11: "the old capital, Girivraja-Rājagṛha" so the name means the old capital or a part of it.

⁵ H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, *Ancient India*, p. 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60

Kosala, in Pāli called Pasenadi, in Sanskrit Prasenajit. His state corresponds roughly to modern Oudh (which includes the city Ayodhyā)⁷. Another contemporary king was Udayana, who ruled the Vatsa territory near the present Allahabad⁸. Moreover, King Caṇḍapadyota was king of Avanti with the capital Ujjayinī in the time of the Buddha⁹. Exponents of the "short chronology" neglected to pay attention to these king contemporaries of Gautama Buddha.

Now we can return to the Council that was associated with this king Kālāśoka about a hundred years after the Nirvāṇa. This is usually called the 2nd Council, since the 1st Council took place about a year after the Nirvāṇa. This 2nd one was convened to judge certain monks who seemed to violate the Vinaya rules. La Vallée Poussin discusses this 100 year attribution, while the Tibetan version says 110 years¹⁰. The Tibetan figure seems to make better sense, because it is reasonable that the establishment of the new capital called Pāṭaliputra should take place exactly 100 years after the Nirvāṇa as a sort of celebration. Then 10 years later would come what is called the 2nd Council. At the time of the Buddha, the capital was of course Rājagṛha, and the name Pāṭaligāma was used for the town which later would become the capital¹¹.

It is necessary to consider the statement of the number of years to Aśoka's coronation according to the Ceylonese history. We know that the kings of the Maurya dynasty as well as the preceding Nanda dynasty had as their capital the city Pāṭaliputra. The first king of the Maurya dynasty is of course Chandragupta. According to Raychaudhuri's calculations, Chandragupta overcame the current Nanda emperor around 324 B.C., i.e. 162 years after the Nirvāṇa per a Nirvāṇa date 486 B.C.; and Raychaudhuri claims that this date is

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰ LOUIS DE LA VALLÉE POUSSIN, *The Buddhist Councils*, Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi and Co., 1976, p. 30, ff.; and for the 110-year figure, see his appendix, p. 67, ff. for citation from the Tibetan Kanjur.

¹¹ Dr. MADAN MOHAN SINGH, "Authenticity of the Buddhist Pali canon for the Cultural History of Pre-Maurya Bihar", in *The Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, 46 (1960), Parts I-IV, pp. 64, 67.

not inconsistent with classical accounts, in particular, the author Justin¹². One may notice that this accession date agrees with the *Mahāvamśa*'s years of Chandragupta's reign – 24 years; his son Bindusāra's reign – 28 years; and four years between the accession and the coronation of King Aśoka. These add to 56, which added to 162 years after Nirvāṇa yield the figure 218, which the *Mahāvamśa* said was the number of years after the Nirvāṇa to Aśoka's coronation – namely, in 268 B.C.¹³ In short, the 218 years is less when calculated back from Chandragupta's accession, say 162 years after Nirvāṇa. And since there is the well-attested story of the 2nd Council about 100 years after Nirvāṇa, this leaves only a space of about 62 years to account for.

So we should consider the inclusive reign of the Nandas. The different traditions available that attribute years to their inclusive reign differ markedly, but all sources agree that there were the Nandas. I accept Raychaudhuri, who appears inclined to accept the solution in certain manuscripts of the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, which is among the oldest of this class of literature, that the first Nanda ruled for 28 years, his sons for twelve years¹⁴. It makes sense for the Nandas to have ruled for no more than about 40 years, a total which easily fits within the about 62-year period. The Nandas amassed great wealth by military conquest, while losing the respect of the people. If we accept such figures as exact, then their 40 years in the 62-year period leaves 22 years to account for, which is easy by the following consideration.

As I read in Raychaudhuri, the first Nanda became the king through the murder of the king Kālāśoka. As the years went by of this king who had made Pāṭaliputra the capital, there came a barber – a handsome bit of maleness who attracted the affections of the queen, who arranged for him to get the job of guardian for the king's sons. He used the opportunity of being within the court to assassinate the king, murder the king's sons, and then to put his own

¹² H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, in *Age of Nandas* (cf. note 4, above), p. 136.

¹³ W. GEIGER (note 3, above), p. xxiii, ff.

¹⁴ H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, in *Age of Nandas*, pp. 22-23.

son in charge as the first Nanda¹⁵. Raychaudhuri inclines to the Jaina tradition that this son was the issue of the barber with a courtesan¹⁶. As to pinpointing the Nandas in the 62-year period, Raychaudhuri says that the dynasty could not have come to power before c. 367-366 B.C.¹⁷ When Chandragupta's accession is put at 324 B.C., if the Nandas ruled exactly 40 years, their reign begins 364 B.C. For a Nirvāṇa date of 486 B.C., the start of the new capital Pāṭaliputra at 386 B.C. and 22 years of rule there before the assassination, the 2nd Council may be put at 376 B.C., with rule thereafter of 12 years before the assassination. Of course, if one were to change the Nirvāṇa date by a few years this would change the other dates accordingly, i.e. for the establishment of the capital Pāṭaliputra, and the years before assassination of its ruler.

It follows that the "long chronology" fits in well with Indian history as the specialists in that field know it. Moreover, the essay I wrote on this, which is considerably longer than the above, went into matters of that particular era of India, when Buddhism started and began to be successful in spreading its message.

In that essay I also had a long footnote explaining why the 324 B.C. date for Chandragupta's accession is reasonable. Yet it must have appeared ridiculous to the casual reader that Chandragupta should meet Alexander in 326 B.C. as a single person with apparently no soldiers at his command, and then just a couple of years later show up as king of the Magadha kingdom. Chandragupta must have observed how Alexander and his men scaled walls, which does not take a lot of men, but the ones used must be skillful. A thousand years later Shivaji decided to retake the mountain fortress called Sing-garh in Maharashtra. I cited a booklet which explained how this was done with just 300 men, and the booklet mentioned that Alexander and his Macedonians used to do something of the same kind. So the question about Chandragupta should not be, why

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13-14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

did he get to be a monarch so quickly, but rather, why did he take so long to succeed in that venture?¹⁸

In the above, I purposely avoided criticizing the various scholars that came to my attention as espousing the "short chronology" because the data that came to their attention seemed to confirm such a conclusion. Unfortunately, if one takes just the Buddhist patriarchs, or the Jaina patriarchs, one can write at length and come up with any date one wishes. A more correct approach, I believe, is to try to harmonize the seemingly divergent solutions – to see if there is a reasonable conclusion that will fit what the Indian historians say, and what the texts say. It does take quite a lot of consideration even to arrive at the relatively few observations which I have made above.

B. Date and era of Nāgārjuna. There have been several Buddhist pandits with the name Nāgārjuna. I here refer to the one whose life mostly spans the 2d century, A.D. and who founded the Buddhist school usually called *Mādhyamika*. In order to reconcile the various stories that were preserved in Tibet and China about this person, it must be accepted that he lived to a ripe old age in full possession of his faculties. It does appear that he lived to over 90 years, while maintaining vigor of mental faculties. There have been others in Buddhist history who were able to continue teaching while getting extremely old.

Various Buddhist scholars have placed Nāgārjuna in the 2d century A.D., some starting him early in the 2nd century, some others having him span perhaps the second half of the 2nd and almost half of the 3rd. I agree with Murti that the *Mādhyamika* system was perfected by Nāgārjuna at A.D. 150¹⁹, which should be construed "by 150 A.D." Robinson is also right in placing Nāgārjuna around 113-213 A.D.²⁰ (which happens to be a theory of the

¹⁸ One may consult A. WAYMAN, *op. cit.*, note 39, pp. 55-57.

¹⁹ T.R.V. MURTI, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London, 1955, p. 87.

²⁰ RICHARD H. ROBINSON, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China*, Madison, 1967, p. 22.

Japanese scholar Hākuju Ui). Ruegg agrees with E. Frauwallner and various other scholars on a date c. 150-200²¹, which is also acceptable, n.b., for a period covering Nāgārjuna's activities on behalf of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The dating accepted goes with the agreement that Nāgārjuna in his old age wrote two moralizing verse works to a Śātavāhana king, who had invited him perhaps invited him back – to South India. The king of the Śātavahana line who fits by date and other descriptions is Śrī Yajña Śātakarṇi. The Indian historian Raychaudhuri may be cited: "Gautamīputra Śrī Yajña Śātakarṇi, who probably ruled towards the close of the second century A. D., was the last great king of his house. After his death, the Śātavāhana empire began to fall to pieces"²². Nāgārjuna did not long survive this great ruler, and presumably died c. 200-202 A.D.

We take Nāgārjuna as having been born c. 105 A.D. There is no solid evidence of where he had his early monastic training. His Buddhist education was presumably complete by 130 A.D. The young Buddhist savant must have deeply impressed his peers and elders. So, presumably about that time he became a monk-*ācārya* at Nālandā. Sankalia reports that the Nālandā University was formalized in the fifth century A.D.²³ However, debates were a regular feature in the Saṅghārāmas which in time grew into the university²⁴. We must presume that Nāgārjuna excelled in these debates in which distinguished Buddhists participated. So in the approximate period 130-150 A.D. out of these debates his main works of the *Mādhyamika* school emerged.

Nāgārjuna's Nālandā period was a volatile era in Buddhist history when Buddhism began to spread in China and when there

²¹ D. SEYFORTH RUEGG, "Towards a Chronology of the Madhyamaka School", in *Indological and Buddhist Studies*, ed. by L. A. HERCUS et al., Canberra, 1982, p. 507.

²² H. C. RAYCHAUDHURI, *Ancient India*, p. 172.

²³ H. D. SANKALIA, *The University of Nalanda*, Delhi, 1972, pp. 51-52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

were great numbers of converts to Buddhism²⁵. For these new converts the old canon – whether in its Pāli form and in the roughly equivalent Sanskrit canon that was translated into Chinese seemed inadequate. The new age demanded a new kind of Buddhist literature; and those who did such composing came up with a new hero called the Bodhisattva, who patterned his career after the Buddha, and so also aimed at enlightenment, while having compassion for people at large. In short, people were told that they too could become a Buddha. They should take the Bodhisattva vow and then practice six “perfections” (*pāramitā*). In time, the texts pushing this new ideal came to be called “Mahāyāna sūtras”.

Nāgārjuna was vehemently opposed to the realist interpretation of Buddhism that characterized the Abhidharma school. Legend connects Nāgārjuna with the *Prajñāpāramitā* type of literature which is more mystical, less realistic. I presume that starting around 150 A.D. he shifted to far Northwest of India of those days, and probably headed a monastery which was engaged in turning out some of the new scriptures. But as such considerations involve a certain amount of speculation, we need not pursue further this avenue at this time. Except to add that Nāgārjuna was definitely involved in activities that made him famous, and which led in his very old age to the invitation from the Śātavāhana ruler.

C. The date and era of Asaṅga and of his brother Vasubandhu. The celebrated Buddhist master Asaṅga (or Āryāsaṅga) is accepted here as the brother (or half-brother) of Vasubandhu, author of the *Abhidharmakośa*, whom Asaṅga converted to the Mahāyāna according to Paramārtha's biography²⁶. Years ago, when discussing

²⁵ See E. ZÜRCHER, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, Leiden, 1959, p. 30, ff. for the Church of Loyang in the latter half of the second century. For the routes taken for the spread of Buddhism in this early period, cf. WILLIAM WILLETTTS, *Chinese Art*, I (Penguin Books, 1958), Map 4, “The Silk Road from China to the Roman Orient (c. 100 B.C.-200 A.D.)”.

²⁶ J. TAKAKUSU, “The Life of Vasubandhu by Paramārtha (A.D. 499-569)”, in *T'oung Pao*, Ser. II, 5, pp. 269-306.

this matter in my doctoral dissertation, as published²⁷, I decided Asaṅga's dates to be circa 375-430 A.D.²⁸; and his brother Vasubandhu's dates to be circa 400-480 A.D.²⁹ There is no quarrel among scholars that there is a Vasubandhu with such approximate dates. There was a theory advanced by Frauwallner that the Vasubandhu, author of the *Abhidharmakośa*, is different from the Vasubandhu, brother of Asaṅga³⁰. I have rejected this several times, starting with my dissertation³¹, as did Jaini³². I have not seen any subsequent arguments by scholars to lead me to a different conclusion. However, I did point out in that same place that there is another Vasubandhu of the fourth century A.D. who belongs to a rival philosophical position, that of the *Mādhyamika*, as noticed from his translations into the Chinese language. And I theorized that the mother of those brothers had applied the name Vasubandhu in admiration of that previous pandit named Vasubandhu. As I have pointed out, the historical and literary data suggests that both Vasubandhus eventually enjoyed royal patronage. The first Vasubandhu, who wrote a commentary on a *Mādhyamika* work, lived in the fourth century and became a minister of a Gupta king. It was a difficult matter for native Indian historians to name this king, "whose identity cannot be established with certainty"³³. I used Mookerji's information about three possible Gupta kings³⁴, and found the third one, Chandragupta II Vikramāditya (c. A. D. 375-

²⁷ A. WAYMAN, *Analysis of the Śrāvakabhūmi Manuscript*, University of California Publications in Classical Philology, Vol. XVII, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.

²⁸ I follow rather closely the dates proposed by SYLVAIN LÉVI, *Asaṅga: Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṅkāra*, Paris, 1911, II, 1-2; and so I reject other dates, such as 280-350, followed by some other scholars.

²⁹ A. WAYMAN, *Analysis of the Śrāvakabhūmi Manuscript*, pp. 19-24.

³⁰ E. FRAUWALLNER, *On the Date of the Buddhist Master of Law Vasubandhu*, Rome, 1951.

³¹ A. WAYMAN, *Analysis of the Śrāvakabhūmi Manuscript*, pp. 19-21.

³² P. S. JAINI, in BSOAS, 21, 1 (1958), pp. 48-53.

³³ RAMESH CHANDRA MAJUMDAR, ANANT SADASHIV ALTEKAR, *The Vākātaka-Gupta Age*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, reprint 1986, p. 155.

³⁴ RADHAKUMUD MOOKERJI, *The Gupta Empire*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 5th ed. 1973.

414) to fit beautifully³⁵. The second Vasubandhu, author of the *Abhidharmakośa* and of Yogācāra treatises, lived in the fifth century and was favored by Narasiṃhagupta Bālāditya (c. 467-473) after he ascended the throne – thus in Vasubandhu's career of later 60's and early 70's³⁶.

Asaṅga is especially known for his prose commentary on the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālaṃkāra*³⁷; for an encyclopedic work, the *Yogācārabhūmi*; and for his *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*. The fifth century Vasubandhu, after his conversion to the Mahāyāna by his brother Asaṅga, became eminent in this field, especially by his important commentaries on major Mahāyāna scriptures. Both these brothers were definitely religious geniuses; and it is certainly remarkable that one family could give rise to both of them.

It is worthwhile to speak more about the attempt to make two Vasubandhu-s out of the one in Paramārtha's biography previously alluded to. This has an interest of being in the category of modern "know better". It is one thing to understand a text better than another one does. This is usually a sort of contrast with one's contemporary. But Frauwallner was pushing something quite different: he was claiming to "know better" than an ancient biographer – a tradition that was accepted by both the Chinese and the Tibetan Buddhists. Even at the time of my doctoral dissertation, when I examined Frauwallner's "two" of them, as to what in the biography he would find for one, and what for the other, I found no "significant contrast". Of course, the dates do not count, because they were added by modern writers. Then, if we know the home city for one Vasubandhu, we do not know it for the other; ditto for family, teacher, royal patronage, place of death. Thus, Frauwallner does not present two contrasting persons. So even though this fine scholar (justly appreciated for a high-level output) continued to claim that he had established two Vasubandhus from the Paramārtha biography

³⁵ Cf. A. WAYMAN, *Untying the Knots*, in the essay "Vasubandhu-Teacher Extraordinary", pp. 142-143 (note 15).

³⁶ A. WAYMAN, in the essay on Vasubandhu, p. 119.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143 (note 18).

in Chinese (and translated into French), I would respond that indeed he found only one Vasubandhu. Because having mentally tried to make two of that one Vasubandhu, he could show no contrast between the supposed two; and so there is only one in reality, even in Frauwallner's portrayal. Of course, I have presented in that Vasubandhu essay of mine some other proofs, for example, admitting and defining a different Vasubandhu preceding the one who was Asaṅga's brother. My own intuition insists that if the modern writer cannot prove what he / she believes to be a superior solution, one should continue to accept the Buddhist tradition.

The above seems enough for dates and era of persons named Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.

D. Summing up. Now the reader of the foregoing may well notice a general historical mix-up in the modern treatment of principal personages of Buddhism, starting with Gautama Buddha, then passing to Nāgārjuna, and then to the brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. I have noticed arguments about dates of traditional Jain authors, and certain Hindu authors have been debated as to their dates (and era). Therefore, it is not enough to say, well, what could you expect when there was an interruption in the Indian lineage of Buddhism when it passed away from that area, and when such an institution as Nālandā was destroyed by invaders? Sometimes I have heard the criticism that traditional India was not interested in history. This does not seem to be a fair criticism, because if the foregoing information in this essay is appropriate, one must admit it is because Indic sources were utilized, hopefully in an appropriate manner. China seems to have done much better in a purely historical orientation; but it had a single written language for the purpose, while India has had several different scripts plus different languages. Also, in India some religious lineages were anti-historical: here I would place the Tantric movements. However, no personage treated in the present essay belongs to such anti-historic movements.

So when we take, not just one of the personages treated here, but the set of them, we arrive at a conclusion that is both disturbing and heartening. We may notice in the case of the Buddha's dates and

era, that the difference between the “long chronology” and the “short chronology” was not in the lack of historical data, but in the interpretation of the data as was available – namely, whether one would pay attention to just a part of the data, or whether one is willing to consider a wider scope of the data, even if this involves more work and time to arrive at a solution.—

In the case of Nāgārjuna, the interest in his dating seems to have been quite secondary. Most of the treatments of Nāgārjuna emphasize what was deemed to be his philosophical position; and such authors would just copy what someone else had said of his approximate dating. While I did refer to various modern writers as to Nāgārjuna’s dating, I could have mentioned still others. Here, again, it is not so much a lack of historical data, but a non-use of what is available. Such authors mention his dating and quickly pass to what interests them more. The main historical part of the argument is of course Nāgārjuna, in his old age, being invited to South India by a king who can be figured out; and since it is agreed that this famous Buddhist lived to a very advanced age, it puts his birth early in the 2nd century. And yet we notice certain references to Nāgārjuna’s dates which take no account of this invitation by the king.

Then there is the dispute over the dating of Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu. But not just over their dates, but even disputes over what they really taught, or what was their real philosophical or religious positions. So, for survey writers on Buddhism, the topic of Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu amounts to a kind of guessing game, or a series of speculations. For their position, there is no substitute for a lengthy, concentrated reading of their authentic works. For their dating, one should find trustworthy authors, who are independently interested in such dating and apply themselves intelligently to arrive at reasonable solutions. And one should avoid authors who suddenly make their guess; and unfortunately became angry or despondent if anyone disagrees.

In conclusion, I am happy to report the foregoing about these personages of paramount importance in the history of Buddhism.